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Poverty and Education in the Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Editorial

By Stephen J McKinney

SERA Poverty and Education Network

The Scottish Educational Research Association network: Poverty and Education was launched on the 19th of November 2014, at the SERA conference being held at the University of Edinburgh. The initial steering group consisted of the co-convenors Stephen McKinney, Stuart Hall and Kevin Lowden, University of Glasgow, John McKendrick, Glasgow Caledonian University and Alastair Wilson, University of Strathclyde. Later Katie Hunter of the University of Strathclyde and Archie Graham of the University of Aberdeen would join this group. The creation of the network was within the context of the strategic renewal and development of the SERA networks. The strength of a SERA network is that it is a national network with an international outlook that is under the auspices of SERA and not a particular Scottish university. This national/international dimension facilitates an academic dialogue and collaboration among some of the leading academic researchers in this field and across the universities. One of the main aims of the Poverty and Education network is to highlight new issues and new research in the impact of poverty on education.

The impact of poverty and deprivation on education is a theme that is of major national and international significance throughout the world. This theme is interdisciplinary, incorporating disciplines such as Education (especially Inclusion and Social Justice), Sociology, Political Policy, Gender Issues and International Studies. The theme is important in the context of Scotland as school education attempts to negotiate the challenges of educating children and young people who belong to low income families and who can suffer the effects of limited financial resource and consequent detrimental effects on diet, housing, adequate fuel and restricted access to cultural capital. Poverty and deprivation can affect the regularity of attendance at school, concentration at school and opportunities to participate in social and cultural activities. There are serious concerns about the educational progress of these children and young people and their future opportunities or destinations.

The Poverty and Education network has organised a number of events since 2014. The network has presented symposia at the SERA conferences in: the University of Aberdeen 2015, University of Dundee 2016, University of the West of Scotland 2017, the University of

Glasgow in 2018 and the University of Edinburgh in 2019. The conference in 2020 was reconfigured to a much smaller number of online events as a result of the pandemic. The symposia presentations at the SERA conference have provided a platform for the members of the network to share their research. The network has also been very pleased to spotlight the research of new and emerging researchers at some of these symposia. Individual members of the network have been very proactive in presenting their research at SERA conferences (and other conferences) through research papers and other modes of dissemination.

The network was represented at the Symposium of Dangerous Ideas in Stirling in June 2015. The network was represented by Stephen McKinney at a special SERA session at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference in Belfast in 2015. Members of the Poverty and Education Network were involved in the BERA Research Commission on Poverty and Policy Advocacy and there was a strong representation of the network at the BERA Commission Symposium held at the University of Glasgow on 20 April 2016. Many of the leading members of the network delivered presentations at this event. Members of the Network contributed a series of short responses on the effects of the pandemic on poverty and education in the *Scottish Educational Review* in 2020.

The Network would like to record a very successful working relationship with Dr Joan Mowat of the University of Strathclyde. Dr Mowat was the Co-Convenor of the SERA Leadership in Scottish Education Network (LiSEN) for the period 2014-2020. This working relationship included a joint network event and a shared workshop at the 2019 SERA conference. John McKendrick, Alastair Wilson and Stephen McKinney and other members of the Poverty and Education Network were involved in the Scottish Universities Insight Institute project: *Poverty, Attainment and Wellbeing: Making a Difference to the Lives of Children and Young People* (2018-2019) that was led by Dr Mowat.

Activity of the Poverty and Education Network during the Pandemic

During the pandemic it has become clear that deeper research engagement with the major issues of the impact of poverty on education is a matter of urgency. There were alarmingly high levels of child poverty in Scotland (one in four children) prior to the pandemic. The economic downturn caused by the effects of the pandemic will create even higher levels of child poverty

as more households struggle with limited resources. The levels of uptake for means tested free school meals have increased as has the uptake at foodbanks throughout the country.

During the period of the Covid-19 pandemic the SERA Executive opted to invite the networks to present short online events in the early evening to maintain communication links within the networks and publicise the work of the networks and the research of the members of the network. The Poverty and Education network organised two events on the 4th and 18th of March 2021 and invited the steering group of the network to present their latest research. These two events were envisaged as initial events, leading to further events that would include invited researchers and speakers. The format for both events was that a series of speakers would have five minutes to present and then there would be comments/questions/discussion from the participants. At the second event on the 18th March, we invited Sara Spenser of Child Poverty Action Group to provide a concise overview of *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown March 2021 Update (Scotland Findings)* that had just been published.

Both events were deemed by the steering group to be very successful and there was very good feedback from the participants. This special edition of SERA Researching Education Bulletin contains a series of short articles based on the presentations at these two events. In a sense these are snap shots, moments in time, that capture some of the research priorities of our steering group in early 2021. Most of the articles are grounded in ongoing research interests and projects and reflect one of the strengths of the steering group and members of the network – a personal and academic commitment to social justice for all children and young people in their access to, and progress in, school education.

The Papers in this Special Edition

In the first paper, Clara Pirie of the Scottish Poverty & Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU), Glasgow Caledonian University provides a very helpful overview of some of the leading research produced in the last twelve months that has focussed on poverty and education. For example, she highlights research published by the Scottish Government, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Poverty Alliance. This overview also features two important reports on school meals that have been produced or co-produced by John McKendrick of the Scottish Poverty & Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU) at Glasgow Caledonian University.

The second paper by John McKendrick, of the SPIRU, Glasgow Caledonian University is concerned with school food. This paper includes a summary of the recent developments in the provision of free school meals outside term time during the pandemic. He describes the situation in England where the UK government changed track twice in 2020 to support the extension of free school meals. This was after the government was subjected to strong public pressure. He then moves onto a concise history of free school meals in Scotland and the proposals to extend free school meals to all primary school pupils. John concludes with a list of pressing issues that need to be examined. One of the issues is that more robust research evidence is required to support the assertion that school food is impacting on pupil engagement or educational performance.

Alastair Wilson and Katie Hunter of the University of Strathclyde present a number of key questions that challenge some of the conceptualisations and interventions in Scottish education that attempt to address the ‘attainment gap’. They argue that we have to focus on the deep-rooted systemic inequalities in Scottish education and society that promote opportunities for the privileged and act as barriers to exclude many young people who lack the system knowledge and connections. They conclude with a short summary of their own work supporting young people from working class and poor households into higher education.

Kevin Lowden and Stuart Hall of the Robert Owen Centre (ROC), University of Glasgow draw on their extensive experience of supporting practitioner research and report on the work of the Network for Social & Educational Equity (NSEE). The NSEE aims to enhance collaborative enquiry among practitioners and educational leaders as part of their work to tackle the poverty-related achievement gap in education. This is support that is co-constructed, flexible and offered in local contexts. They comment that the ROC team has a strong and consistent commitment to the promotion of teacher agency as an integral part of positive educational change to tackle educational and social inequity.

Archie Graham and Kirsten Darling-McQuistan explore the idea of ‘example spaces’ and provide some insights into recognising difference in *how* a curricular subject can be taught, via the co-construction of a landscape based on three different theoretical perspectives. Archie and Kirsten ask some challenging questions about the use of example spaces in the preparation of teachers for working in high poverty school environments. It will be intriguing to follow further updates on this research.

Stephen McKinney of the University of Glasgow examines the position of young carers in Scotland arguing that they should receive more academic and public attention. He explains how they are officially identified as young carers, the duties and responsibilities of young carers, and the challenges they face in balancing their school education with caring. The young carers often belong to households with limited income and the caring duties often affect their ability to engage fully with their school education.

Katie Hunter, Alastair Wilson and Lio Moscardini of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland developed case studies of three local authority areas to understand what music opportunities exist for children and young people both within formal education and out with schools. They discovered that the high and rising costs of music tuition excludes some pupils. They also discovered a trend in formal music provision towards the fulfilment of performance-based criteria. This benefits those children and young people who can access in-school or private tuition and opportunities to engage in extra-curricular music activities that enhance broader engagement. The team are hoping to engage in deeper research into the causes of this inequality.

Archie Graham, Peter Mtika, Dean Robson, Kevin Stelfox and Lindsay MacDougall from the University of Aberdeen focus on inclusive pedagogy to prepare and support new teachers to work inclusively with increasingly diverse groups of learners, including those from high poverty contexts. They adopt the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) framework for supporting teachers for working in diverse contexts. They report on the findings of a research project that shows the importance of probationers developing intra-professional working practices to help bridge the principles of inclusive pedagogy within their classroom practices.

Stephen McKinney, Stuart Hall and Kevin Lowden highlight some of the features of digital exclusion (or digital poverty). The effects of digital exclusion were heightened during the series of school closures and partial school closures that occurred throughout the world. This impacted on children and young people who had limited access to technology and to the internet but also on some teachers who struggled to upskill and lacked the necessary equipment.

Sara Spencer of the Child Poverty Action Group contributes a series of insights from the two surveys conducted by CPAG in 2020 and 2021. The surveys were designed to assess the impact of school closures and learning at home for families on low incomes. She addresses issues such as food insecurity and digital exclusion and identifies both the challenges faced by the families and some of the successful support that has been provided. A large percentage of the samples in both surveys, for example, commented that cash replacement for free school meals is the most efficient way to provide food for the children.

The SERA Poverty and Education Network would like to thank Dr Lorna Hamilton for the invitation to submit the special edition and for her enthusiasm and encouragement for this project. We would also like to thank all those who have contributed to the special edition,: Archie Graham, Kirsten Darling-McQuistan, Lyndsay MacDougall, Peter Mtika, Dean Robson and Kevin Stelfox of the University of Aberdeen; John McKendrick and Clara Pirie of Glasgow Caledonian University; Kevin Lowden and Stuart Hall of the Robert Owen Centre, University of Glasgow; Katie Hunter and Alastair Wilson of the University of Strathclyde; Sara Spencer of the Child Poverty Action Group and Stephen J. McKinney of the School of Education, University of Glasgow. Finally, we offer thanks for the support of the SERA Executive, especially Dr Angela Jaap for her assistance in organising the Eventbrite page and link and for her advice at both of the online network events.